

Hooked on satire

Llewelyn Morgan

When political leaders fall from favour, people feel an irresistible urge to damage and humiliate their image. But what can someone do if they have only words to use as weapons? Juvenal, the last and by general agreement greatest of the Roman satirists, was obsessed with how awful people were. Here Llewelyn Morgan explores how Juvenal develops the tradition of Roman satire which aimed not just to damage powerful men but to humiliate them by dragging them through the dirt and putting their vices on display.

Shaming Saddam

The image that everyone remembers from the fall of Baghdad in 2003 is the demolition of the colossal bronze statue of Saddam Hussein in the centre of the city. What we all now suspect is that it wasn't quite as spontaneous as it seemed: an American armoured vehicle did most of the pulling down, and there were a suspicious number of TV cameras on hand to capture the moment. But there's no doubting the passion with which that Iraqi crowd hurled abuse at the statue and physically assaulted it, beating it with their shoes. And (to insert a footnote) the shoes are interesting. In the Arab world footwear signifies dirt and degradation, and just as shoes are removed before entering a mosque, as a sign of reverence, so bringing a shoe into contact with someone is a gesture of contempt: Saddam was getting the treatment of a thief or other criminal.

It may seem peculiar that an inanimate statue could provoke such intense hatred, but similar scenes are very familiar from the Roman world, no violent change of regime being complete without some energetic smashing of statuary. Pliny the Younger recalls the joy he and other senators derived from vandalizing images of the emperor Domitian after his assassination in A.D. 96: 'it was our pleasure to dash those arrogant faces to the ground, to attack them with the sword, savage them with axes, as if blood and pain would follow from every blow.'

Shaming Sejanus

For me, though, that scene in Baghdad called to mind one particular moment in Roman history – or, strictly speaking, in Roman literature, since it is immortalized by Juvenal, the most celebrated of the

Roman satirists. It is A.D. 31, and Sejanus, commander of the Praetorian Guard and right-hand man of the emperor Tiberius, has been exposed as a traitor. Never a very enthusiastic emperor, Tiberius had in A.D. 27 withdrawn entirely from the city of Rome and retired to the island of Capri, allegedly getting up to all kinds of depraved activities there, and leaving the unscrupulous Sejanus free to extend his power in Rome without hindrance. Eventually the emperor woke up to the threat and, in Juvenal's words, 'a large and long-winded letter came from Capri' (it was characteristic of Tiberius never to get straight to the point) which demanded Sejanus' condemnation and execution. Juvenal paints the scene in Rome:

*The ropes are heaved, down come
the statues,
Axes demolish their chariot-
wheels, the unoffending
Legs of their horses are broken.
And now the fire
Roars up in the furnace, now
flames hiss under the bellows:
The head of the people's darling
glows red-hot, great Sejanus
Crackles and melts. That face only
yesterday ranked
Second in all the world. Now it's
so much scrap-metal,
To be turned into jugs and basins,
frying-pans, chamber-pots.
Hang wreaths on your doors, lead
a big white sacrificial
Bull to the Capitol! They're drag-
ging Sejanus along
By a hook, in public. Everyone
cheers.*

Juvenal 10.58–76 (trans. P. Green)

Juvenal, like those TV cameras in 2003, homes in on the iconic moment when a statue of a once powerful man is toppled,

and this statue is particularly impressive: a representation of Sejanus in a chariot, the most prestigious form of portrait sculpture. But this magnificent statue is experiencing a precipitate fall from grace, melted down into a bunch of utterly everyday, unglamorous objects culminating in something you defecate into. When Juvenal then turns to Sejanus' real body after his execution, it is suffering an equivalent kind of humiliation. The second most powerful man in the world endures the fate of common criminals, whose corpses were dragged by a hook to the Gemonian Steps on the Capitoline Hill, where they lay exposed to view and public scorn before being hurled into the River Tiber. Like Saddam, Sejanus has gone from the glorious leader celebrated in a huge and impressive statue to the utter degradation of a hook or a beating with shoes.

The theme of Juvenal's tenth satire, in which this account of the fall of Sejanus comes, is the misguided nature of most people's prayers: according to Juvenal, the things people habitually wish for – wealth, beauty, power and so on – bring nothing but suffering. Sejanus illustrates why we should not pray for political success:

*His interminable pursuit
Of excessive wealth and honours
built up a towering
Edifice, storey by storey, so that
his final downfall
Was that degree greater, the crash
more catastrophic.*

Juvenal 10.104–7

Juvenal is a very witty poet: the notion of a statue recycled into a chamber-pot is brilliantly funny. But he is also very disconcerting. Romans especially would find this attack on something so central to their lives as prayer very troubling, even as they laughed. So Juvenal manages to be repellent and compelling all at the same time, and that continues to be true of the kind of satire that is written today. He has a particular genius for encapsulating his message in a memorable epigram. It is during his account of Sejanus that he delivers his famous jibe at the decadence of the Roman people, once rulers of the world, now only interested in 'bread and circuses', *panem et circenses*. A famous expression, still in use today – but how are Romans meant to feel about such a damn-

ing assessment of themselves?

The most satirical thing about Juvenal's Sejanus, though, is the view of humanity it embodies. Roman satire thought of itself as the antidote to the optimistic (satirists would say, unrealistic) world-view presented in epic poetry. Epic heroes (think of Aeneas) are beautiful and virtuous: cities are founded, good triumphs over evil. Satire, on the other hand, sees the very worst in us. Sejanus is thus the classic satirical target, reduced from that godlike figure high on his plinth to a criminal on a hook.

Shaming satire

Juvenal was the last of the great Roman satirists, but satire had always been obsessed with crooks. The father of satire was Gaius Lucilius (c. 180–102/1 B.C.), and in book 1 of his collection he had delivered a kind of satirical mission statement, in the form of a parody of an episode from what was at the time (the *Aeneid* hadn't been written yet) Rome's national epic, the *Annals* of Quintus Ennius. In *his* book 1 Ennius had described a council of the gods in which two momentous decisions were taken: Rome was to be founded, and its founder, Romulus, was to be admitted to heaven as a god. In his parody Lucilius also described a council of the gods, but this was a satirical council with a very different agenda. Lucilius' gods decided to threaten the Romans with imminent destruction if they did not mend their wicked ways, and they singled out a corrupt individual who encapsulated Rome's wickedness, Lentulus Lupus, and condemned him to death for his crimes. Lucilius thus set out satire's stall: where epic glorified Rome and raised its great men to heaven, satire would castigate Rome's decadence and damn its criminal leaders.

The best example of satire's mission to turn gods into criminals is a remarkable work from the very beginning of the reign of Nero in A.D. 54, the *Apocolocyntosis* of Seneca. 'Apocolocyntosis' means something like 'pumpkinification', and it is a parody of 'apotheosis', the Greek word for 'deification'. What Seneca's satire sets out to do is to reverse an action taken after the death of the previous emperor, Claudius. Claudius had been declared a god. But in the *Apocolocyntosis* the divine council meets again, this time to debate the fate of Claudius, who has turned up in heaven after his official deification. They discuss his case (and Seneca takes the opportunity to make some brutal digs at Claudius' physical disabilities), and conclude that he is not a god but a criminal who had committed terrible offences against Rome. They then condemn him to death in the Underworld. Seneca's brother Gallio summarized the plot of the *Apocolocyntosis* very succinctly: 'Claudius has been raised to heaven by a hook.'

When all is said and done, the Romans were very good at punishment. They put a lot of thought and effort into it and were disturbingly imaginative in the ways they dispensed it. In the aftermath of the slave revolt led by Spartacus we are told that 6,000 slaves were crucified along the Appian Way from Rome to Capua. In Rome punishment was public entertainment, criminals being executed in devilishly creative ways during the lunch period of the Games to which Juvenal tells us the Romans were so addicted. But if the Romans were world experts on punishment, they were less sure of their abilities when it came to literature. In fact the only literary form they confidently claimed as their own invention was this dark and malevolent form they called satire. So it's probably no coincidence that the kind of poetry that Romans felt was their greatest gift to the world could easily think of itself as the artistic equivalent of dragging a criminal off on a hook.

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